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ABSTRACT

Network policy, for the past several years, has been to preface many controversial programs with a general advisory warning that "this material may not be suitable for all family members." A random sample of the general public was surveyed in order to determine the usefulness of the current warning system. Only one-fourth of the adult respondents use the warnings to alter their own viewing; however, over 50% of the respondents with children use them to alter their children's viewing. Violence is perceived as the content most in need of advisory warnings. The main finding of this study is a desire for more "specific naming of program content" (57%), a smaller desire for a "number or letter rating" system (21%), and little desire for the current general warning system (16%). (Author/AA)

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VIEWER ATTITUDES TOWARD TELEVISION ADVISORY WARNINGS

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As commercial television grapples with the contemporary problems and values of our society, programmers are increasingly confronted with the problem of including content which may be considered inappropriate or offensive by certain viewers. The recent court ruling which invalidated the "Family Hour" concept has further complicated the situation. Program producers and broadcast executives are faced with the difficult choice of either deleting material which might prove objectionable to certain viewers or running an advisory warning before the program. The problem becomes particularly acute with those feature films, produced originally for theatrical distribution where explicit language, sex, and violence are tolerated to a far greater extent. However, even some programming dealing with "mature themes" which were produced under network supervision have run into severe criticism by viewers and network affiliate stations. A prime example is NBC's made-for-TV film, Born Innocent which, in dealing frankly with the problems of a young women's correctional institution, raised a furor among viewers and stations and ultimately stimulated the development of the Family Hour.

Network policy, for the past few years, has been to preface many of these controversial programs with an advisory warning which states something to the effect that, "The following program contains material which may not be suitable for all family members and viewer discretion is advised." However, the excessively broad nature of such a warning may make it almost as worthless to many viewers as no advance warning at all.

Writing about the CBS film Helter Skelter, columnist Nicholas von Hoffman criticized the ambiguous quality of the disclaimer: "Before the movie starts there is a disclaimer warning 'younger or sensitive viewers' that what follows may be too 'mature.' Too mature is a corporate public relations euphemism for what? Too violent, too vile, too tasteless?"[1] An example of viewer frus-

tration with the present advisory system can be seen in a letter to the editor of a Georgia newspaper: "The television industry's disclaimer at the beginning of a program may apply to anything as innocuous as a decolletage. This is certainly no warning to the parent or protection for the child."[2] Recently, viewers who tuned in to see CBS broadcast the highly violent film, Death Wish were warned that it contained "mature content." They were not told that even with the network's editorial trimming, the program was excessively violent.

The ambiguity of such warnings, and the inability to arrive at a common consensus of what is or isn't acceptable, isn't a problem which is faced by viewers and critics alone. Even the networks and their affiliate stations are in disagreement about what constitutes "acceptable programming." This past season, both CBS and ABC drew harsh criticism from a number of their affiliate stations over their intention to broadcast two films, Death Wish and Nightmare in Badham County. At least 12 affiliates either refused to carry the films or re-scheduled them at late-night times, claiming they were inappropriate for their audiences.[3]

As one might suspect, networks have not reached a consensus on this issue, either. During the 1976 Fall season, Van Gordon Sauter, CBS vice-president in charge of program practices, accused NBC of violating the spirit of the then operative "Family Hour" by programming the series Baa Baa Black Sheep which Sauter charged, "exploits violence, glorifies excessive drinking and condones dubious moral standards."[4] If the networks themselves can't agree on what is and isn't acceptable content, how then can the viewer make any rational decision based upon the highly ambiguous warnings which preceeds some of the shows?

Other critics have charged that the warnings may produce a boomerang effect, drawing people to watch certain programming in much the same way pornographic movie producers lure their audiences with prominent references to their "X" ratings. Writing in the New York Times, TV critic John J. O'Connor criticized NBC for running a disclaimer before their film about the Lindberg kidnapping. O'Connor found the program commendable in its avoidance of any sensational treatment of the crime itself. Yet the network insisted on a warning anyway. As O'Connor wrote, "The warning, then, is puzzling. Perhaps NBC thinks warnings are good for business."[5] ABC TV's Phil Boyer, speaking at the 1976 Broadcast Education Association's annual meeting, conceded that warnings might have a boomerang effect on some viewers but also maintained that no data is available which adequately addresses the issue.[6]

The average viewer's concern for adequate information with which to select the programming they and their families watch, can be seen in the results of a 1973 TV Guide nationwide survey. 55% of those questioned reported that they would be in favor of the establishment of a rating system for television programming which is similiar to the one now used for motion pictures.[7] Although some of the networks are discreetly working on such a system, their public stand is to staunchly oppose such a system, claiming that it would inevitably lead to censorship. In a discussion of the impact of the film rating system, the American Civil Liberties Union reached a similar conclusion: "Our analysis of the voluntary rating system leads to the conclusion that it acts as a prior restraint on the creative process and denies filmmakers access to the free-market place where the public can make its own judgment."[8] This argument is supported further by a disturbing finding in the TV Guide poll. 51% of those questioned favored the establishment of a censor board to screen programming in advance.[9]

However, an opposing argument could be advanced that by warning viewers

of possibly offensive material, program producers and writers can be given greater artistic control over their program content and thus be freer to address controversial issues in a straightforward, sophisticated approach without the network fearing that it will offend viewers who were not forewarned about the program's content. In other words, an effective warning system could lead to greater, not less, creative freedom.

Throughout the debate it is interesting to note that no one has attempted to investigate what the recipient of TV program content--the viewers--think about the present system, and what alternative methods might be devised which would be most useful to them. In order to provide this information, our study was designed to address two basic questions: (1) How useful to viewers is the present advisory system? and (2) Are there any alternative systems which viewers might find more useful in making program viewing decisions?

Methodology

A team of trained interviewers placed calls to 550 residential telephone numbers which were gathered by a systematic, random sample of the Athens, Georgia telephone directory. The interviews were conducted over a one and a half week period from October 20th to October 29th, 1976. There were 115 refusals, 35 numbers which were disconnected or out of service, and 116 numbers which were busy or not answered after at least two call backs. 284 interviews were successfully completed for a completion rate of 71% for all contacted numbers.

The interview questionnaire was constructed to investigate the study's two basic questions:

(1) The present advisory system: Respondents were asked if they were familiar with the advisory warnings and, if so, whether or not it had influenced their personal viewing and/or control over their children's viewing.

Respondents were also asked a series of questions to determine the perceived value of the rating system and if not of value, why not.

(2) Alternative Warning Systems: A series of questions were asked to determine what possible alternative advisory warning systems viewers would find most useful to them. Viewers were offered three choices: a general warning such as is presently used, a specific statement of possibly offensive content, or a numerical or letter rating system which is similar to the kind used in motion pictures.

We also asked viewers to list the kind of content which they felt was most important to warn viewers about in advance. These were: "explicit sexual content or nudity," "explicit or excessive violence," "explicit or aggressive language," or "mature program themes" (such as shows on drugs, unconventional mores, etc.). Subjects were also asked in which places they felt the warning information would prove most valuable. Possible responses included "in TV Guide or newspaper listings," "before the program or during station breaks," "in newspaper or other print advertisements for the show," or "in broadcast commercials on radio and television publicizing the program."

Finally, subjects were asked a series of demographic questions including age, last educational grade completed, estimated amount of daily viewing time, and whether or not there were children living at home.

Results

THE PRESENT ADVISORY SYSTEM

Familiarity with advisory warnings: Over 96% of the entire sample reported that they had seen the advisory warnings, indicating the publics' high degree of familiarity with the advisory system.

Influence of advisories over respondent's viewing: Although virtually every respondent was familiar with the advisory system, only 24% of the entire sample reported that the advisories had influenced their decision to watch or not watch a show, while 71% reported no influence. Advisories were found to be far more influential among those with less than a high school education than among those with higher educational levels. 35% of those with less than a high school education reported being influenced by the warnings while only 14% of those with at least two years of college or more reported being influenced. Thus, as education increased, the influence of the advisories decreased. (See table #1)

---Table 1 about here---

We also found that as age increased, influence of the adivsor tended to increase. (See table #1) 22% of the subjects under 35 years of age reported being influenced by the advisories as compared with 26% from the 35 to 54 year old group, and 32% of those over 55.

Although our question referred specifically to the influence of the warning on the respondent's own viewing, we found that those who had children living at home reported significantly higher influence than those respondents without children. (See table #1) 34% of those with children reported that they were influenced by the warnings as compared with 17% of those without children at home.

When we asked those respondents who acknowledged being influenced by the warnings, what their actions were; 39% reported that they did not watch the program, 37% reported that they did watch but with increased caution and interestingly, 24% said that they watched the show "with increased interest."

Although the number of viewers in the last group was not very large, the result may support the contention that for some viewers the advisories create a boomerang effect by titillating viewer interest in a show which they think may contain highly sensational content.

The amount of daily viewing time did not affect the advisories' influence over adult viewing decisions.

Influence of advisories on children's viewing: 54% of the respondents with children reported that the warnings had influenced their decision to permit their children to watch the show. Of those who were influenced, 81% said they did not let the children watch, 17% said they usually watched along with the child, and less than 2% permitted the child to watch anyway. We found this pattern consistent across all age groups and across all educational levels. Also, the amount of daily viewing time for the household had no impact on parental influence over their children's viewing.

How valuable are the advisories?: Although a relatively small number of adults reported being personally influenced by the warnings, 56% of the respondents said that they found the present system to be of value to them. However, a fairly substantial minority of 37% reported that the advisory system was not valuable to them.

Of those reporting "no value," 77% said that the present system "doesn't fit my needs," 8% said that the warnings were not specific enough to be of help, and 5% simply didn't like the idea of warnings. The fairly large difference between those who reported the system as "valuable" and those who reported personal "influence" pose a number of interesting questions which are addressed later in the article.

The most reliable predictor of the warning's perceived value was whether or not children were living at home. Viewers with children found the advisories far more valuable than those without. (See table #2) 75% of those

with children found the system valuable, 46% of those without children said the warnings were of value.

Also, we found a significant relationship between educational level and perceived value. (See table #2) Respondents with at least a high school education or two years of college were the most favorable about the warnings as 63% agreed they were valuable.

---Table #2 about here---

Age of respondent and amount of daily viewing were not significant predictors of differentially perceived value for TV advisory warnings.

ALTERNATIVE ADVISORY SYSTEMS

When we offered respondents their choice of three possible warning systems, 57% said that a specific statement of potentially offensive content would be most useful to them. 21% preferred a number or letter rating which would be similar to that used in motion pictures, and only 16% wanted a general warning such as the type which is presently used.

It is interesting to note that at one point in our questionnaire we ask respondents if they would be interested in seeing a rating system for television which is similar to that of motion pictures, and 60% say "Yes." Our results closely match those found by TV Guide's nationwide survey. However, when we later offered the respondents their choice of the three alternatives, the majority selected the "specific statement of program content" alternative. Since the TV Guide survey did not offer such a choice, it is difficult to predict whether their results would have been similar, but the findings from our study should provide some interesting data for broadcasters to consider.

The choice of a system was unaffected by age, education, or the amount of viewing time of the household.

Offensive content: When viewers were asked to name the content they thought was most important to warn about, (this was asked without prompting or given preconceived response categories) 56% of the entire sample mentioned "explicit or excessive violence." 38% of the sample were concerned with the portrayal of sex or nudity, 13% mentioned expiicit or aggressive language, and 2% mentioned "mature themes." There was a significant increase in concern over violence from low-education groups to high with 35% of the low-education group voicing concern about violence, 54% of the middle-education group, and 63% of the high-education group. ($x^2=8.37$, $df=2, p<.02$)

We found no significant differences in these content categories over age, amount of viewing groups, or between those with and without children at home.

Where to place the warning information: When offered one place wherein advisory warning information would be of greatest value, almost half of the entire sample, 48% said "directly before the program and during breaks." Another 35% said that including the information within the "TV Guide and newspaper listings" would be of most value to them. About 6% of the sample preferred to have the information "included on broadcast previews and commercials for the program" and less than 1% wanted to see it in "printed advertisements" for the programs. The results suggest that the present practice of running the disclaimer before the program should be supplemented by adding the information in broadcast listings. This would result in satisfying the stated requirements of over 80% of the respondents.

Our results showed no differences among educational, age or children/no children sub-groups concerning where respondents wished to see the information.

Discussion

The results of our study showed that virtually all of the viewers in our sample were familiar with the present advisory warning system and that over half of the respondents reported the system was valuable to them. However, the large minority of respondents who reported that the system was not valuable raises a number of important questions for broadcasters to consider. The networks must frequently walk the narrow line between serving the public's interest and also providing the necessary creative freedom and flexibility for their program writers and producers. The establishment of a more useful advisory system may permit them to be more responsive to both sides of this issue.

A discrepancy was found between the number of viewers who reported that the warnings had influenced their viewing decisions and the much larger percentage who found the system to be of value to them. There may be two possible explanations for such an apparently contradictory finding.

First, the question of "influence" referred to a specific behaviorial action on the part of the respondent while the question of how "valuable" the respondents' perceived the advisories were addressed to a more abstract judgment of the warning system. It is quite possible that some viewers said that they found the warnings to be of value even though they may not have been directly influenced by the disclaimers. In other words, there is a difference between what some subjects said and how they actually behaved. Other researchers have found similar contradictions. In his survey of Television and the Public, Robert Bower found a considerable difference between the type of programming respondents claimed they wanted to see produced on television and in the actual programming which the subjects watched.[10] Perhaps a similar situation has occured with some of the sample members in our survey as well.

Secondly, although many viewers may not have actually been influenced by the disclaimers, they might, nevertheless, have appreciated the fact that the networks and stations were making an attempt to inform viewers about potentially objectionable programming. It may be one of those instances in which although you don't use the ratings, it's nice to know they are there, just in case they are ever needed.

While our results showed that about one-quarter of those surveyed reported using the warnings for their viewing selections, we found that warnings were most influential among those respondents with children living at home. The findings clearly indicate that viewers with children used them to influence their children's viewing and reported them to be far more valuable than did the overall sample.

This is an important factor for the networks and stations to keep in mind when planning the use of such warnings or the development of any new systems. As Bower pointed out in his survey, 43% of those questioned in the study reported that they had "definite rules" by which they supervised their children's television viewing.[11] Obviously, there are a sufficient number of parents who take their responsibility seriously and would welcome whatever additional information could be provided to make an informed choice in their family's viewing.

Our results further indicated that the approach viewers overwhelmingly endorsed is a "statement of the specific content" which might prove objectionable or inappropriate for some viewers. A variation on this very system has been used in the New York Times movie reviews for the past year in which a brief comment is carried beneath the review itself which explains the reasons underlying MPAA movie rating.

For example, the review might indicate that the movie received an "R" rating for a number of scenes with graphic violence and the use of explicit

language throughout the film. This additional information permits the potential movie-goer to evaluate the film's content in a much more informed manner and permits him to make a decision as to the film's suitability for his own individual situation. Some parents may not object as strenuously to explicit language or nudity as they would to highly graphic violent content and this specific statement enables them to make a more informed decision. It seems only natural that television viewers deserve similiar treatment. Such a system would not require the development of an objective rating scale and would be relatively easy to administer.

The results from our series of questions concerning the type of content which viewers, unaided, found most objectionable tends to support the "specific statement" approach. While most television censors are highly sensitive to sexual material or explicit language and less concerned with violence, our findings indicated that most viewers considered violence to be far and away the most potentially offensive item.

Rather than placing a censor in the position of determining which factors in a program make it suitable for particular audience groups, as is necessary with a numerical or letter system, a statement of specific content would place the editorial responsibility in the hands of each individual viewer. Such a system would be an effective compromise between the ambiguous general warning which is currently used and the specific letter or number movie-style system which is difficult to construct, even harder to accurately administer, while also not suited to fit the requirements of different viewers with different levels of tolerance for a variety of potentially objectionable items.

It seems time that the networks permit viewers to take a more active role in assuming the responsibility for programming content which enters their home. At the same time, the networks need to be more responsive in serving

the creative and artistic requirements of those legitimate producers and writers who wish to have more aesthetic freedom to address some of the contemporary issues of the day, with a straightforward and sophisticated approach. Likewise, the first amendment rights of producers, network and affiliate executives, as well of the viewers would be more adequately and objectively served.

If viewers can be adequately warned prior to a telecast, that they might find certain content objectionable, it would be difficult for many to criticize the networks for presenting material which they find offensive. The decision to watch becomes that of the viewer and no one else. While no warning system can ever solve the frequent abuses of television--particularly the excessive use of gratuitious violence--a useful and meaningful warning system would go a long way in placing the responsibility for deciding whether or not to watch a particular program precisely where it belongs, in the hands of the individual viewer.

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TABLE 1

The Effect of Age, Education, and Children in Household on the Influence of TV Advisory Warnings on Adult Viewers

(N=284)

	EDUCATION (By Grade Level)			AGE			CHILDREN IN HOUSEHOLD	
	11 or less (n=34)	12-14 (n=114)	15+ (n=136)	18-35 (n=205)	36-54 (n=54)	55+ (n=55)	Children (n=106)	No Children (n=178)
Influenced my decision to watch	35%	31%	14%	21%	26%	32%	34%	17%
Didn't influence my decision to watch	44%	65%	84%	76%	67%	48%	62%	77%
Other/No Opinion	21%	4%	2%	3%	7%	20%	4%	6%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	(x^2=34.61, df=4, p<.005)			(x^2=20.42, df=6, p<.01)			(x^2=11.11, df=2, p<.01)	

TABLE 2

The Effect of Education and Children in Household on the Perceived Value of TV Advisories by Adult Viewers

(N=284)

	EDUCATION (By Grade Level)			CHILDREN IN HOUSEHOLD	
	11 or less (n=34)	12-14 (n=114)	15+ (n=136)	Children (n=106)	No Children (n=178)
Find warnings valuable	59%	63%	50%	74%	46%
Don't find warnings valuable	23%	30%	46%	20%	47%
Cchen/No Opinion	18%	7%	4%	6%	7%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	(x^2=17.08, df=6, p<.01)			(x^2=23.67, df=2, p<.001)	